

Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research
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Advanced Language Development and Study Abroad

by

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Among language education professionals, study abroad is often portrayed both as a meaningful, personal encounter with another languaculture (Agar, 1994) and as an obligatory phase in the quest for advanced proficiency. Often basing their views on deeply significant experiences of their own, teachers tend to view a sojourn abroad as the highlight of academic language learning, a time when learners emerge from the decorous boundaries of institutional talk to discover their own, idiosyncratic relationship between foreign language use and extracurricular reality. While studying abroad, students discover that a foreign language need not always be interpreted as a bloodless academic object severed from its cultural origin and habitat (Lantolf, 2006). The language may instead become a key to worlds of difference. It may become a medium of self-reinvention and expressive delight in identification with the communicative repertoires of others (Kramersch, 2006).

In the American literature on second language acquisition abroad, however, language learning has traditionally been disconnected from the qualities of the experience. On the one hand, considerable effort has been devoted to ethnographic and other qualitative studies attempting an “emic” understanding of students’ perspectives, most often without explicit consideration or measurement of language learning *per se*. Based on this research, we know that a sojourn abroad does not always yield a rich and fulfilling immersion experience. Rather, the quality of the experience is crucially dependent upon students’ ongoing construction of identity, including general dispositions toward learning and the specific ways in which students position themselves and are positioned by others in interaction.

On the other hand, the attention of many scholars is drawn away entirely from the concrete, particular, or personal, and toward attempts to sketch broad generalizations portraying study abroad as a source of language proficiency. Reflecting the broad tendency to favor

utilitarian over humanistic goals in SLA research, this work struggles to prove that study abroad yields measurable results and that therefore its outcomes justify the investment of students, parents, institutions, and governments. Often, the results of these studies reveal significant individual variation that cannot be adequately explained in the absence of attention to individuals. More importantly however, when results are interpreted for pedagogical purposes, the construct-driven nature of the research creates a situation in which the pursuit of “proficiency” or of “fluency” overrides all other considerations, including perhaps especially the discovery of “languaculture” so closely associated with living abroad.

The CALPER Study Abroad Project

This paper summarizes the approach to “advanced language proficiency” adopted in the CALPER project ‘The Social Context of Language Learning in Study Abroad.’ The goal of the project, broadly defined, is to understand the development of language competence in relation to the life histories and particular, concrete experiences of individual students. Such a project requires drawing together several domains, normally treated separately in the research literature, within a “comprehensive qualitative investigation.” Such an investigation, according to the cultural psychologist/ activity theorist Carl Ratner, echoing Vygotsky, “employs many of the characteristics of a criminal investigation” (1997: 79). It is about who did what, when, where, with whom, and how, and most importantly, in response to what motives. Thus, the study examines the development of proficiency in light of students’ *histories of engagement* in language learning activities. In a series of case studies, the research investigates: 1) students’ personal dispositions, stated aims, and stances toward language learning; 2) the reported nature of the experience, including the extent to which students were able to negotiate access to foreign-language mediated interaction; and 3) the results of an array of assessments examining foreign language mediated task performance and awareness of sociolinguistic variation.

Participants in the study were 24 undergraduate French majors or minors, of whom 23 participated in a study abroad semester in France (Spring 2003), and one in a full year program (2002-03). In its demographic composition, the cohort reflects the broader features of American study abroad groups as revealed, for example, in the “Open Doors Report” of the Institute for International Education; the cohort included 19 women and 5 men, a majority of third year students, and only 2 non-White participants. Data collection for the study included extensive qualitative interviews with individual students, on-site observation, collection of bi-weekly reflective journals, and a testing component consisting of traditional and non-traditional

assessments of language development. Most of the students (20) were full participants in the study, that is, they provided journals and interviews as well as test data. The remaining participants opted to participate in the testing phases alone.

For an approach to the study of language learning as history of engagement, the study borrows its core theoretical framework from contemporary sociocultural theory, an approach emphasizing the organic links between human activity and its social, cultural and institutional context (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Wertsch, 1998). In particular, the study draws upon three major insights: 1) the observation that human action is fundamentally mediated: humans think, speak, and act by using the cultural tools, including narrative tools (Wertsch, 2002), that characterize the settings where they live; 2) an historical, or genetic approach to the observation of developmental processes (Vygotsky, 1978); and 3) an interpretation of the research participant as an intentional human agent who plays a defining role in shaping the qualities of their learning but who, at the same time, may be subject to variable positioning within specific settings and relations of power (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). Taken together, these insights provide a strong rationale for a case study approach to the experiences of the group and of individuals within the group. Based on extensive qualitative data these case studies examine:

- 1) the nature of communicative interactions to which the students have reported access
- 2) the qualities of students dispositions toward language learning in study abroad
- 3) the influence of sociohistorical context upon both the students' dispositions and the nature of the socialization process in study abroad, including how students are received, whether or not they are disposed to pursue advanced proficiency, and the extent to which they foreign language competence.

Assessment of Language Development

In the assessment of language development, the project aims to sample the students' communicative abilities in various domains, including particularly those domains that are relatively difficult to access when learning takes place only in classroom environments.

Underlying this approach is the assumption, borrowed from the literature on multicompetence, that the ability of multilingual persons is best understood not as a form of deficit in comparison to a putative ideal monolingual speaker, but rather as a set of repertoires developed through processes of language socialization. Unique to each individual, these repertoires are appropriated

through concrete activity in particular, real-world settings, in response to the environment and to personal needs and desires (Pavlenko, 2005).

For an approach to defining relevant communicative repertoires, the study returns to the construct of CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) and BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) as articulated by Cummins (1979). For Cummins, CALP is associated with academic skill and classroom activity. BICS are the communication skills required for oral fluency and are considered “basic” in the sense that they develop within naturalistic contexts and in the absence of formal instruction (and indeed, the constraints on classroom discourse options normally hinder their development, at least in foreign language contexts). In Cummins’ scheme, BICS include the sociolinguistic aspects of language competence whose development depends upon access to a range of divergent communicative settings. In the education of young children, these skills are considered “basic” in the sense that they develop prior to the onset of schooling.

The ultimate effect of Cummins’ construct was to make clear that abilities such as “academic skill” or “proficiency” are abstractions from specific socialization processes within institutional and other sociocultural contexts. Thus, both CALP and BICS do in fact include a sociolinguistic component. In the case of young adults who are learning a foreign language, CALP-related activities normally dominate, making of these the more “basic” of the abilities in question. However, the distinction remains useful to indicate the fundamental difference in kind between learning in institutional settings engineered to foster academic competence and learning in informal settings outside the classroom. It is precisely this distinction that becomes prominent in reflection on benefits of study abroad for classroom learners of foreign languages. Study abroad normally does involve some form of academic pursuit, and thus may be expected to contribute to CALP-related abilities. In addition, and crucially, study abroad is assumed to offer students access to a broad range of formal and informal interactions functioning to socialize students into the abilities represented by BICS.

Thus, assessment for the study was designed to sample the student participants’ communicative repertoires as they relate both to CALP and BICS, both before and after their sojourn abroad. In addition, the study focuses on students’ awareness of the sociolinguistic variation observable in everyday interactive settings, a key aspect of language learning outside classroom contexts.

- For samples of the students’ academic competence, the study relies on a standardized text, the Test de Français International. Published and scored by the Educational Testing Service, this examination includes a Listening section and a Reading section assessing

reading comprehension and mastery of grammatical concepts. Samples of the students' writing and speaking capabilities were collected in the form of a picture-story narrative based on the Frog Stories of Mercer Myers.

- For samples of language use related to BICS, the project includes pre- and post- role play exercises designed to illustrate formal and informal settings. These samples allow us to observe how the students craft their approach to register variation in spoken French. Additionally, the students participated in a Language Awareness Interview intended to examine the extent to which the study abroad experience heightened their awareness of sociolinguistic and pragmatic variation in French. The contemporary literature on the linguistics and learning of French includes many references to a long-term historical divergence of the formal features of spoken French from the standard forms of the written language (e.g. Duran & McCool, 2003; Gadet, 1996; Joseph, 1988) . Thus, in learning to “speak French” and particularly in becoming an advanced user of French, comprehension of socially meaningful register variation is a crucial step. The interview includes sections on variation in syntax, colloquial lexis, address forms (tu versus vous), and formulae for leave-taking.

Interpreting Results

The findings of language development measures in this study mirror those of many research projects examining language learning in study abroad: they show a general trend toward gain by the group as a whole, with considerable variation among individuals. Some of the students displayed significant improvement in their abilities to perform well on a standard test, vary their use of register in accordance with contextual features, regulate their own performance of French-language mediated tasks, and comment on the social meanings of variants in syntax or lexis. Others returned home appearing to have lost some aspects of the competence in French they displayed before their stay abroad. Some appeared to have gained domain-specific abilities, such as understanding and use of the formal language use typical of service encounters, without displaying similar growth in other domains.

Whereas in many studies of language learning abroad the reporting of such findings constitutes the end of the story, this primary analytic effort of this research is devoted to understanding *why* some students succeed as language learners while others do not. In combining an approach to proficiency as repertoire with analysis of students' own reported history of

language use and dispositions toward language learning, the study traces the development of advanced language abilities both to their sources in specific learning environments and to the broader, socio-historical and ideological resources claimed by students in their interpretation of study abroad.

To take just one example, in an in-depth analysis of American policy documents related to international education, Gore (2005) found that study abroad is interpreted on a backdrop of “dominant” and “alternative” discourses. According to Gore, the dominant discourses interpret study abroad as parenthetical diversion from the business of academic achievement, analogous to the traditional Grand Tour, and appropriate mainly as a finishing touch on the decorative education of elite women. This discourse is constructed on an implicit baseline assumption that education of quality is only available in the United States. In the alternative interpretive framework, particularly visible since the tragic events of September 11, students express willingness to undergo hardship and face challenges in the interest of gaining intellectual perspectives and practical competence unavailable at home. Furthermore, they view study abroad as a personal investment in furthering peace, social justice, or national security.

Cases histories of individual participants in this study suggest that students, like policy-makers, interpret study abroad in terms of these dominant or alternative models. Students may view study abroad as a potentially frivolous “vacation” from academic work rather than an opportunity to engage in meaningful learning experiences. Thus, “Deirdre,” a student who claimed strong motivation to learn French in the pre-departure interview, expressed misgivings about the value of study abroad throughout her sojourn, positioning herself as a victimized consumer of goods, services, and the study abroad program, and spending the majority of her time in computer-mediated interaction with friends and family at home. Expressing feelings of alienation based on the perception of gender-based discrimination, she isolated herself from all social interaction, limiting her use of French to classroom listening and those service encounters necessary for survival. Deirdre’s documented language development was modest at best, with notable gains only in recognition of the formality required within commercial settings.

By contrast, “Bill” approached study abroad as an opportunity to seek out cultural, ideological, and historical worlds of difference. Throughout his stay, he cultivated willingness to suspend judgment in favor of gaining access to the perspectives of others. Although his performance on the standard test resulted in the lowest pre-departure score, in a variety of social settings Bill was received with patience and forgiveness of error. His performance in French was actively assisted by his host family, his classmates, his co-workers, and the members of campus-

based social groups he joined in order to further his own integration into local social networks. At the conclusion of his study abroad sojourn, Bill claimed strong motives for language learning. His post-test gain score on the standard test was the highest in the group. Despite the fact that this CALP-related proficiency remained at the “Intermediate” level, and thus relatively low by comparison with the cohort as a whole, Bill out-performed most of the other participants in measures related to BICS.

Conclusion

Readers of the literature on applied linguistics and language learning note considerable recent interest in the investigation of study abroad contexts, no doubt reflecting the profession’s growing concern for fostering language competence beyond the early stages and for developing approaches in which language and culture are no longer estranged, but are appreciated in their complex interrelationship. In the present study the results of domain-specific assessment are considered in relation to students’ own accounts of the experience. Students’ histories of engagement in language learning abroad are diverse and even idiosyncratic, but they draw on cultural resources for the interpretation of study abroad that are widely shared among American undergraduate students. That fact that these stories shed light upon the language learning outcomes of students’ experience underscores the value of interpretive projects integrating narrative and other qualitative study with formal assessment. Research on language learning abroad may profit in particular from future attempts to “reconstruct detailed life stories of learners hand-in-hand with an interest in linguistic development over time” (Block, 2003: 138). Such research helps to unravel the mysteries of individual differences in achievement while honoring the complexity of the study abroad experience.

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